

Chapter 3

Potentia: A Lost New Town

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Historical Context and Research History

Today, not much reminds the occasional traveller along the rather touristy central Adriatic Italian coast of the existence of the once vibrant Roman colonial town of *Potentia*, located near the modern town of Porto Recanati (Le Marche region). The coastal site, where in 184 BC officials and *agrimensores* delineated the new living spaces and units for those Roman citizens who were involved in the incorporation of this part of the peninsula into the Roman Republic, now lies mostly under grass and arable land, and is crossed by a busy coastal road and railway. Its position, barely a metre higher than the rest of the plain, and set on an almost N–S oriented beach ridge of sand, clay and local gravel beds, hardly changes our perception of a generally flat and unimpressive terrain. Looking at this landscape one is also not immediately informed about the original position of the city lying just north of the main Roman river bed of the Potenza (the ancient *Flosis*), as the present-day stream now flows more than 1 km to the north – a result of late and post-medieval human interference with its course (see Alfieri 1947; 1949). Only recent geo-archaeological mapping of the ancient coastal plain around *Potentia* by means of augering and geo-electrical measurements (see especially Goethals et al. 2005; 2006; 2009; Corsi et al. 2009) allows us to imagine the original situation.

And yet this river mouth area, at the eastern end of a valley corridor connecting the Adriatic with the upper Tiber region and ultimately with Rome, and traversed by a *diverticulum* of the major highway of the *Via Flaminia*, was once a very strategic and dynamic sector (see Figure 3.1). With the foundation in the early years of the second century BC of the coastal colony of *Potentia*, the whole area of northern *Picenum* entered a definitive phase of urbanisation (see Alfieri 1977; Moscatelli 1985; Paci 1991; Delplace 1993). According to the few direct written sources, the colony probably soon gained, in or by 174 BC, a circuit wall, a street network, a temple for Jupiter and a forum (Livy XLI.27, 1 and 10–13). Official sources for the subsequent history of the town are, however, minimal to non-existent, although a few written testimonies reveal something of its ups



Figure 3.1



Figure 3.2

and downs: thus Cicero mentions that in 56 BC a major earthquake destroyed part of the town (*de Har. Resp.*, 28, 62); epigraphic evidence attests *Potentia's* flourishing development from the Augustan age fully into the second century (Paci and Percossi Serenelli 2005). The lack of substantial epigraphic survivals from the third century AD could point to a decline in prosperity and although the city became a bishop's seat around 400, it clearly did not outlast the Early Middle Ages (Alfieri 1985). As this chapter will show, to understand the topographical and structural development of this new town and to perceive its deconstruction one necessarily has to turn to archaeological research and evidence.

The archaeological site of *Potentia* was first located by Nereo Alfieri, a specialist in ancient topography from the University of Bologna, during the late 1940s (Alfieri 1949), but rescue-excavations directed by Liliana

Mercando of the regional Soprintendenza in the 1960s–70s had to be awaited before architectural remains were investigated *in situ*. During exploratory digs in an area for gravel exploitation, Mercado revealed parts of the northern cemetery of the city (some 400 graves) and elements of a housing sector, now recognised as part of the town's north-eastern corner (Mercando et al. 1974; Mercado 1979). A later study by Moscatelli of a series of good vertical aerial photographs (notably RAF pictures of WWII) helped determine many indications of the town's regular street grid (Moscatelli 1985), while Paci has produced important analyses of all known monuments and inscriptions (Paci 1995; Paci and Percossi Serenelli 2005). Between 1985 and 2006 regular excavation campaigns, under the direction of Edvige Percossi of the Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici delle Marche, have been organised in one particular sector of the monumental centre of the city. These have identified a late Republican temple, surrounded by a portico and other buildings of Republican and imperial date, including a possible *macellum* and two large private houses or *domus* – these only partly excavated (Percossi Serenelli 1990; 1995; 2001).

Although these excavations produced crucially important data regarding the chronological development and some idea of the architectural articulation of a distinct part of the city centre, a more holistic topographical approach was deemed necessary to understand the wider picture of the city's plan and development. This aim was made possible during the Potenza Valley Survey Project, initiated under my direction in 2000 and involving a long-term study of the whole valley from the Iron Age to the early medieval period. As part of this mostly survey-based project,

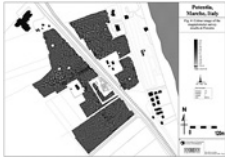


Figure 3.3

Figure 3.4



a series of intra-site city surveys was initiated on the four abandoned Roman town sites in the valley: the colony of *Potentia* on the coast and the *municipia* of *Ricina*, *Trea* and *Septempeda* in the interior. Most fieldwork has since 2002 been concentrated so far on *Potentia* and involved first of all very intensive aerial coverage (Figure 3.2), flying in different seasons and photographing from two types of airborne platforms, a regular plane and a so-called helikite. Data capture was via regular analogue and (since 2003) digital aerial photography, while in recent years also experiences with Near Infra Red and Ultra Violet photography have proven very useful. In addition a micro-topographical model of the town area was produced, using detailed geomatics, while geomorphological approaches enabled better insights into site location and landscape context. Furthermore, the former urban area was the subject of intensive grid-based artefact surveys. That part of the wider urban area, inside as well as outside the wall circuit, which is currently used as arable land, was subdivided into regular units and large samples of datable ceramics, building materials and other artefacts were systematically collected and processed. But most importantly, the intramural parts of the site not affected by modern disturbances (some 70 per cent) were completely surveyed by geophysics, essentially a combination of resistivity, electromagnetic (Figure 3.3) and ground penetrating radar. For this work the Ghent team was assisted by crews from the Universities of Southampton (APSS) and Ljubljana and by the small firm Eastern Atlas. It is vital to stress that these intensive field surveys were carried out in close collaboration with the geomorphological team of Ghent University in order to take into account biases induced by physical processes at the site, such as erosion and riverside sedimentation. A final core action has been re-analysis of the older excavation data, and, thanks to close collaboration with the Soprintendenza and Edvige Percossi, a new study of the material and related structures from all previous excavations in the town's north-eastern quarter, and of the still unpublished data and finds from the excavations near the Republican sanctuary situated at the heart of *Potentia*, has been undertaken. We mention in particular, fuller ceramic analyses by H. Verreyke and P. Monsieur. These have especially allowed more defined chronological interpretations as well as

more comprehensive GIS-based cartographic integration of all structural data. Finally, between 2007 and 2010, the team also undertook limited stratigraphic excavations in the area of the western gate in order to check the validity of some survey results and to gain new data regarding the topography and chronology of the city's monumental limits, including the circuit wall, the road system and the funerary area immediately to the west.

Reconstructing the Town Layout

After some eight years of intensive new fieldwork on and around the *colonia* of *Potentia* a first really detailed urban plan is now available (Figure 3.4). It comprises the exact location of the town wall, including the three (or possibly four) city gates, the full street network, the forum and several other monumental complexes, many units of city housing, three extramural funerary areas and a large segment of the suburban and rural settlement system and roads belonging to the city's *territorium*. Although some geomorphological constraints mask the visibility of the ancient structures, especially in the western and southern parts of *Potentia*, we can clearly distinguish a strictly rectangular town plan of c. 525 x 343 m (almost 18 hectares *intra muros*), laid out parallel with the coast. The urban area is subdivided by a regular network of streets oriented parallel with the walls, thus forming city blocks or *insulae* (a minimum of 58) of different dimensions. Fairly central to the plan are the principal roads, the *cardo* and *decumanus maximus*, with the forum square set south west of their crossroads.

From the (new and old) archaeology and the restricted historical information, we can now propose three major phases in the development of the urban plan of Republican and early imperial *Potentia* (Vermeulen and Verhoeven 2006). Phase I relates to the early years of the official foundation of the colony in 184 BC, and represents the initial settling of the arriving colonists. The chosen town area, maybe surrounded by a ditch (*fossa*) and earthen bank (*agger*), covered only c. 525 x 300 m, and was of NNW–SSE orientation, its shape likely conditioned by the presence of the longitudinal beach ridge.

Soon after, in 174 BC according to Livy, the site of the colony was fully urbanised: thanks to the financial intervention of censor Fulvius Flaccus, the 'military-looking' settlement developed into a real town with appropriate structures encouraging full social and economic evolution. These structures, we are told, consisted of a temple for Jupiter, a circuit wall with three arched gates, a regular street network with sewers, an aqueduct, and a portico with shops to close the forum square. Current archaeological data tally closely with this detailed historical information for *Potentia*'s Phase II: (i) traces have been

explored of the circuit wall (built of fine ashlar sandstone) and of at least one gate during the 2007–10 excavations (Vermeulen, forthcoming), while two other gates are presumed on the basis of survey evidence; (ii) the oldest phase of the street system was uncovered during the excavations of the *decumanus maximus* near the West Gate, while sewer structures were found in this same area and near the excavated temple; (iii) the rectangular forum with flanking portico and *tabernae* has been identified through electromagnetic surveys at the *cardo-decumanus* crossroads, but its chronological evolution and the character of some of the adjacent (public?) buildings remains to be established; and (iv) the documented Temple of Jupiter possibly equates with the excavated Republican temple, built in the second century BC directly east of the forum; alternatively, structures revealed by survey on the northern side of the forum could belong to the early sanctuary mentioned by Livy.

The still somewhat hypothetical Phase III concerns an enlargement of the walled space, some time after the mid-first century BC. We can suggest an enlargement of 50 m to the east, with the now redundant old eastern wall replaced by a street – as reflected by a larger and more pronounced trace in the aerial photographs than most other streets – and the new wall (with gate?) built on the edge of the beach area. Support comes from excavation evidence, such as the lack of early structures in the north-eastern corner of the city (excavated by Mercado in the 1970s) and the discovery of a destruction layer in the temple sector – the latter dated to around the mid-first century BC, coinciding with Cicero’s mention of a major earthquake destroying *Potentia* (Percossi Serenelli 2001, 39). Potentially the town suffered much in this catastrophe, thus requiring major reorganisation and rebuilding in the following decades.

Further observations can be made about the topography and functional zoning within and around the city limits. Inside the walled city other public buildings located so far comprise the excavated temple and *macellum* directly east of the forum, and a small theatre near the eastern city wall and possible baths building in the south. The geophysical surveys helped to distinguish remains and partial plans of many housing units, some of *domus* type, others clearly *tabernae*, and others simple habitations and shops, these spread all over the many *insulae*. Outside the walls the three (aerially-)detected roads leaving the city gates to the west, north and south/south west, were bordered by cemeteries with funerary monuments facing onto the roadway. Some of these immediate suburban areas also saw industrial activities: for example, between circa 120 BC and AD 100, several flourishing amphora production workshops (connected with the wine- and olive-producing villas in *Potentia*’s immediate hinterland) were active in spaces directly north and south of the city (Vermeulen et al. 2009; Monsieur, forthcoming). Indications from aerial survey of possible

harbour facilities at the mouth of the river Potenza, just south of the town, enhance our understanding of the city's wider topographic articulation, while recent research has also highlighted aspects of the well organised 'centuriated' agrarian landscape beyond the city limits (Corsi 2008; Corsi and Vermeulen 2009). These data all seem to sketch what can be termed the 'classic' urban picture, as shown by the excavations in the temple area, demonstrating a great vitality to the town across the Late Republic and early Empire. According to the dates of the portico surrounding the original temple and of the *macellum* to the north and a luxurious building (*domus?*) to the east of the temple, the city centre was especially monumentalised in the time of Augustus; further expansion and investment came under Trajan and the early Antonines, before major problems hit in the 'Third-century Crisis'.

Late Roman *Potentia*

During the early Empire Roman towns were expressions of both central authority and private patronage, exhibited in an array of institutions and monuments, amenities and services: streets and walls, baths and sewers are all structural manifestations of an active urban society. From the third century onward, however, religious buildings and walls came to be the defining features of many urban landscapes, while many other structures showed progressive signs of decline and transformation. A decline in public and private expenditure on other urban monuments encouraged the slow but steady erosion of civic amenities and infrastructure (Ward-Perkins 1996). For Italy there is general agreement that the late and post-Roman period saw a widespread and marked decline in town-dwelling, with various Roman centres progressively abandoned and those that survived were less populous and certainly less monumental than before. Indeed, it can be claimed that one third of the 372 cities listed by Pliny in the eleven Augustan regions in Italy were no longer occupied in the post-Roman period. However, we must bear in mind that the abandonment of cities was probably a gradual phenomenon, very rarely with wholly abrupt ends (Delogu 1990, 147–8).

This decay is also obvious in the Adriatic part of central Italy, even if individual cities might enjoy widely divergent fortunes within a region, and despite the fact that some late Roman political developments selectively favoured town life in the north-eastern part of the peninsula. The choice of Ravenna by emperor Honorius as the new capital of Italy in 402, at the time of Visigothic incursions in the north, entailed an enormous building programme here (numerous churches, strong city walls, etc.), in complete contrast with other towns at that time, which were busy shrinking within their circuit walls. Its choice for reasons of defence

(due to its situation in marshland of difficult access) certainly affected the evolution of the coastal part of northern Adriatic Italy; further change followed the reconquest of Italy by the Byzantine Empire from the 530s, with the Adriatic becoming a major trade and military communications channel with the eastern Mediterranean (Christie 1995, 100). But even though the city remained the Byzantine capital of Italy until the mid-eighth century, little or no building work occurs in Ravenna beyond 570, and also its port area Classe suffered economic collapse after 600 (see Augenti, this volume).

Warfare – barbarian raids and civil conflict – had a serious impact on many towns of central Adriatic Italy, such as with the documented devastation by the Iuthungi in AD 271. Archaeological indicators exist in terms of destruction deposits, but also in losses of public buildings and new defensive wall building – at Rimini, for example, the amphitheatre (probably now out of use for entertainment) was made into part of the city walls (Rambaldi 2009, 211–12). In the case of *Potentia*, as noted above, direct written sources for later Roman events are extremely poor: epigraphic data are practically non-existent from the third century onwards and from surviving literary sources we can do little more than identify that the town was an episcopal see by the beginning of the fifth century (Alfieri 1977). This status is of course important since bishops gradually took on the role of providers and distributors of wealth, which formerly lay with the civil authorities (*curiales*). Faustinus, the first known bishop of *Potentia*, in fact played an important role on the fifth Carthaginian Council (also known as the ‘African Synod’), where he acted as the legate of Pope Zosimus. We should assume that a church was built in *Potentia* around 400, maybe at the same time or somewhat later than the closure and dismantling of the (excavated) temple east of the forum; however, archaeology still has to prove the existence of such a new Christian sanctuary. Sources record the presence of a bishop in *Potentia* up to the beginning of the sixth century, which at least implies some form of steady settlement continuity throughout the fifth.

Even if the late Roman developments of *Potentia* are at the moment only visible via a thin body of archaeological evidence, some of these can now be summarised with some certainty (Vermeulen and Verreyke, forthcoming). Part of this information is derived from our recent artefact surveys (Verreyke and Vermeulen 2009), while other data were obtained during old and new excavation work and from related pottery studies (Verreyke 2007). The intensive artefact surveys organised by the Ghent team in 2002–03 were spread over all the city area (Vermeulen 2008) and although visibility at surface level was slightly obstructed by the characteristics of the present-day landscape, and information from the fifth century onwards is probably biased as a result of diminishing imports, some important observations were possible. Firstly it

must be observed that almost no late Roman settlement material was recovered in the immediate extramural areas, where, by contrast, early Roman finds are frequently found. Especially south of the city, near the probable river mouth harbour, but also in other areas, such as near the West Gate, abundant early imperial pottery concentrations suggest that some suburban zones were much frequented, if not permanently inhabited, during the first two centuries of our era. The nature of these finds, such as fragments of *dolia* and building materials, seems to exclude that these finds are solely connected with funerary areas. The absence of conclusively late materials among these scatters suggests that the city shrank back within its walled confines from the third century.

When we scrutinise the chronology of the intramural finds of *Potentia*, we can see an evolution in the occupation pattern. It seems that during the fourth century and the first half of the fifth, the bulk of the walled area was still occupied. From the mid-fifth century onwards, occupation probably contracted, since material becomes restricted to the northern area of the city, the central area around the forum and the south-central zone to its south (Figure 3.5). The entire eastern section of the city lacks finds of post-c. 450. During the first half of the sixth century AD, the occupation areas contracted further as shown by the limited and sparse distribution of finds. Naturally, we must take into account that the surface scatters do not always indicate permanent occupation and deposited waste of an abandoned area might give the same pattern of surface finds. Moreover, we cannot estimate the level of post-depositional processes displacing the archaeological record. However, comparison of data from the north-eastern quarter of *Potentia* with the surface scatter of the adjacent area shows a very similar pattern. The excavations in 2007–10 of the West Gate show that the surface scatter almost fully matched the chronological range attested through excavation (Vermeulen et al. 2009, 92–3). Thanks to this approach of linking the surface finds to the ‘in situ’ situation, we can better appraise the post-depositional processes which bring the artefacts to the surface. Finally, it is important to highlight how the extreme south-eastern sector of *Potentia* was completely devoid of surface finds. Integrating very revealing aerial photographs, geomorphological survey, geophysical prospection and a detailed microtopographic mapping by the Ghent team revealed that this area was flooded and thus destroyed by the river Potenza – an event probably of the Middle Ages, although there is no evidence to suggest that a natural disaster was responsible for the final abandonment of the city.

What of evidence from specific excavated town spaces? Those trenches in the city centre, conducted by Percossi since the 1980s in an area that we can now define as lying immediately east of the forum square, revealed some features typical in the development of late Roman towns in Italy, where partial

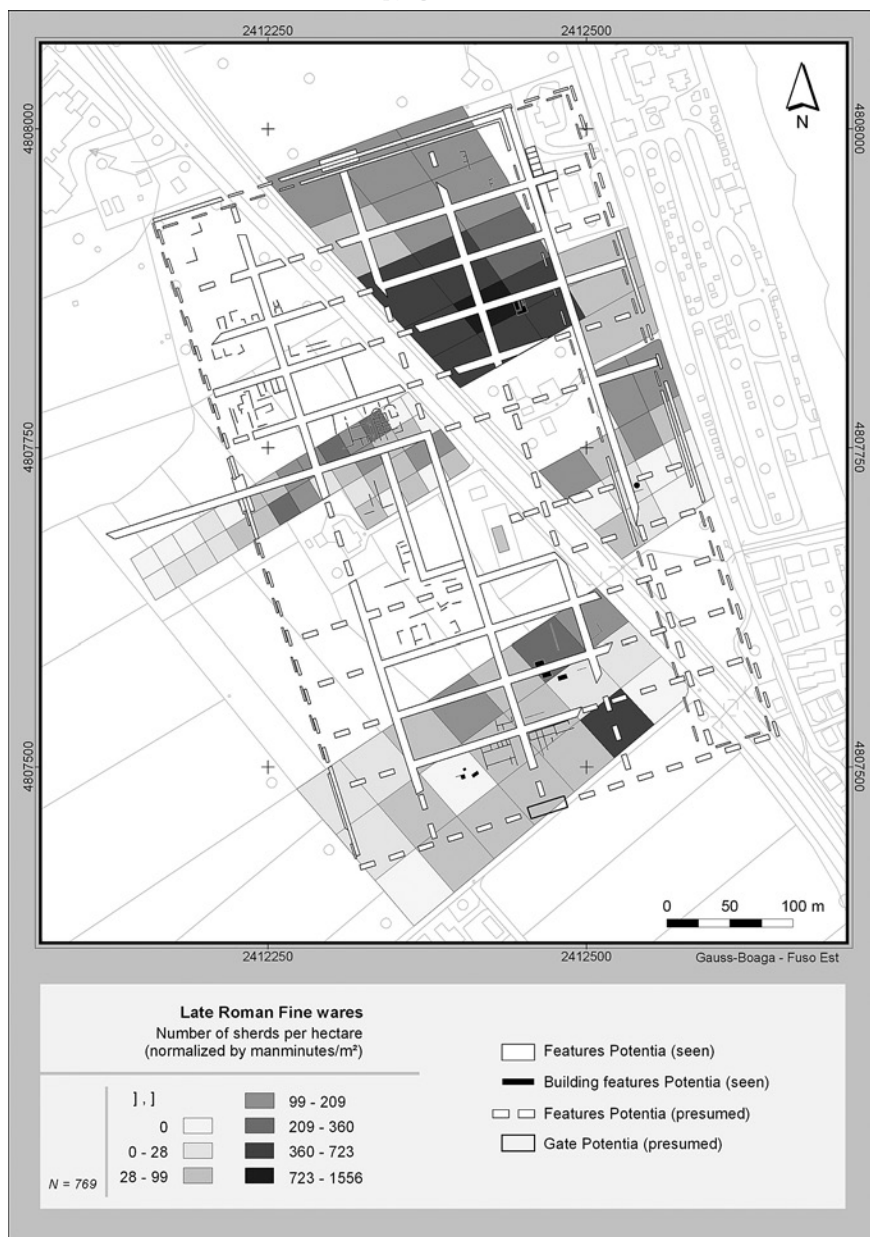


Figure 3.5 Results of the 2002 grid-based artefact survey by Ghent University over Potentia, highlighting the datable late Roman finds. Note the uneven distribution of the pottery in certain areas of the intramural space.

abandonment, subdivision and encroachment on the sites of former grand buildings can be observed (Figure 3.6). Typically the forum, some of its public buildings and the nearby *domus*, which were maintained in many towns into the fifth or early sixth century, see division into smaller rooms for multiple dwelling. Encroachment by poorer dwellings, or commonly, by small commercial and artisanal or industrial units, frequently occurs over existing public spaces. In the heart of *Potentia* already by the third century, the former public *macellum* was restructured and probably used as a metal workshop. However, this can still be connected with the economic revival of the late third and fourth century when the central area of the city was seemingly reorganised, and with finds (e.g. the coin series) suggesting a quite positive atmosphere. By the end of the fourth century, the entire pagan temple complex was transformed: the temple itself was demolished, the surrounding portico closed off and the area in front of the temple levelled up to the base of the podium (Percossi Serenelli 2001). Such large-scale transformation of the monumental centre testifies to a certain level of organised building activity, although subsequent constructions were limited to the subdivision of former buildings with re-used building material or with timber or other less durable materials. The former portico underwent several subdivisions, while the area in front of the temple and the complex's former entrance onto the *decumanus* became a closed courtyard. Sixth-century finds are attested here and the latest perhaps run into the seventh, but it remains unclear what exactly was the character of this late presence in the urban core (Verreyke 2007).

In the north-eastern corner of *Potentia*, where parts of an *insula* were rather rapidly excavated in the 1970s (Mercando 1979), the finds revealed occupation only up to the early fifth century. Eleven graves were located above the severely robbed late Roman (early fifth-century) occupation levels and on the N–S oriented *cardo* (Figure 3.7). One of the skeletons was buried in an amphora, the others were covered with a series of tiles or with a tuff slab. The graves were very modest and could therefore not be dated precisely, but their stratigraphic setting probably places them in the later fifth and/or sixth centuries AD. In contrast, the 385 graves of the La Pineta necropolis, just north of town, run from the second century BC to the fourth century AD (Mercando et al. 1974, 142–430; Percossi Serenelli 2001, 44). However, the excavator, Liliana Mercando, identified a nucleus of later graves in the south-western area of the necropolis, which she dated to the fifth century. Potentially this late extramural group in the south-western part of the ‘La Pineta’ necropolis is connected to the intramural graves set in the north-eastern *insula* of *Potentia*. If so, this implies that the northern city wall, of uncertain condition by that time, no longer defined a deliberate and real limit to the town.

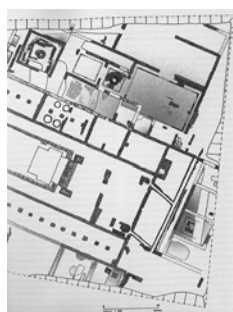


Figure 3.6



Figure 3.7

Finally, in a third sector of the city, the Ghent University excavations of the West Gate have opened another window on these later changes. It seems that the town's monumental defences here and the *decumanus maximus*, entering the city from its hinterland, persisted without much change, apart from a (fourth-century?) phase of some restructuring (perhaps just repairs to the gate), throughout the fifth century. Judging from the quality of the fourth-/fifth-century *decumanus maximus* itself, repairs of the street surface, now a mixture of gravel and tile fragments, are poorer than before. The sixth century, however, brought a rapid decline to both city wall and gate, while the road was gradually transformed into a very simple trackway (Figure 3.8).

At the moment we lack evidence for the construction of any revised and reduced urban curtain, i.e. a citadel. The quality of our aerial photographs and the results of a full magnetic survey of the town surface seem to exclude this scenario. In this way *Potentia* probably had a very different development to its twin town on the coast of northern Marche at *Pisaurum* (Pesaro), which was established as a colony with the same urban outline and in the same year as *Potentia*, but where in fact the late third-century AD walls of Pesaro after the incursions of the Iuthungi (AD 271) surrounded a smaller city area than before, which fits well with a presumed general depopulation of central Adriatic Italy around that time (Alfieri 1985; Luni 2003; Dall'Aglio and Castagnoli 2002, 22). The new walls at Pesaro now girded only the former monumental city core and left outside all former suburban quarters. The walled nucleus, however, also featured more open areas, leaving space for new cemeteries and for market gardening, demonstrating the beginning of the ruralisation of the town.



Figure 3.8

Abandonment and Dismantlement

The passage of the Goths in the early fifth century, civil wars and, much later, the Byzantine-Gothic Wars (535–554) were very destructive for *Picenum* and for many of Italy's towns and lands. References in the sources and in the laws

to military damage, severe food shortages and disease reveal these as extremely arduous times. Procopius, reporting on the sixth-century Byzantine-Gothic War, indeed claimed that over 50,000 people died in *Picenum* as a result of plague, a disaster no doubt connected with the unstable security and political situation of most of the peninsula (Alfieri 1977; Bocci 2004, 39). Centralised settlements inevitably would be among the first to be hit by this calamity.

Study of the lists of bishops' seats indicates that towns in elevated locations in the landscape survived better, as a result of their better defensibility. The inland towns of the Potenza valley are never mentioned after these wars. On the coast, even *Potentia* disappeared from the lists after the fifth century. Higher altitude survivors in this general area of Marche include *Cingulum*, *Matelica*, *Camerinum* and *Firmum*. After the invasion and territorial expansion of the Lombards (from 580 onwards), a differing pattern of urban survival can be seen in the central Adriatic: the Byzantine Pentapolis province was fairly resilient and displayed a higher rate of urban survival (chiefly along the *via Aemilia*), but not one coastal city survived south of Numana (Alfieri 1985, 237). Dall'Aglia (2004, 90) is too positive in his views of urban survival in Pentapolis: many were abandoned (e.g. *Suasa*, *Pitinum Mergens*, *Pitinum Pisarense*), and others declined considerably (*Tifernum Mataurense* and *Forum Sempronii*) (Bernacchia 1997; Destro 1999). Furthermore, in the Lombard controlled region of the Esino river all Roman cities between Jesi and Fabriano were abandoned (*Planina*, *Attidium* and *Tuficum*). In sum, of the 38 Roman cities in Le Marche, once cited by Pliny, only 23 became episcopal seats, six were reduced to simple villages and nine others were never heard of again. As we know from *Potentia*, even some of the bishops' seats eventually vanished.

As at many 'extinct' cities in Italy it is still very difficult to date the final abandonment of *Potentia*. But we do need to make a distinction between the end of the *urban character* of the city and possible subsequent *dispersed* occupation within these former urban seats. Contexts excavated in the temple area at *Potentia* point to a regular occupation into the early sixth century AD at the latest. However, there are some features in the area of the eastern temple-portico, which point to a later sixth- or even seventh-century occupation (see Verreyke 2007): post-holes have been located, most probably remnants of wooden beams used to support a wooden roof. The use of less durable building materials like wood or mud-brick between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages is now widely attested within Italian cities (Brogiolo 1999, 110; Christie 2006, 194–8). However, in our case study, these wooden structures probably relate to an occupation phase following the end of the urban centre (Vermeulen and Verreyke, forthcoming). In other words, it is possible to claim some scattered

occupation in *Potentia* during the period of Lombard dominance, but without clear or organised character.

Nucleated settlements now lay elsewhere on hilltops: in our study area, the sites of later towns such as Potenza Picena (Monte Santo) to the south, Recanati to the west and Loreto to the north immediately spring to mind. The ruins of *Potentia* were possibly long part of the landscape, but there is not much hard evidence to precisely date the phases of dismantling the former city. During the 2007–10 excavations at the West Gate we could observe the extreme thoroughness of the despoliation or robbing. The whole excavated stretch of the town wall was exhumed, perhaps already in early medieval times, and an undated lime kiln positioned on the systematically destroyed curtain wall area, shows that much processing of *spolia* was done *in situ* during a second phase. Recent (2010) geophysical evidence in that same area of the west wall indicates the existence of a whole battery of such lime kilns. We know from documentary evidence that with the construction of the Castello Svevo (Porto Recanati), in the course of the thirteenth century and the subsequent construction of the nearby town, building materials from *Potentia* – a veritable open quarry – were still being systematically re-used, while marble was burnt down for the production of lime (Alfieri 1947, 11).

But the most important factor in the unimpressive afterlife of the site of *Potentia* and in its early dismantlement could be connected with a notable monastic presence in the vicinity: Santa Maria in Potenza, located just south of *Potentia* at the former Roman bridge over the Potenza, can only be traced back to textual evidence of AD 1030, but the first clear reference to the Santa Maria al ponte di Potenza dates from 1184, when the ‘Ordine Crociferi’ settled here (Allevi 1992, 249–50). Nevertheless, we cannot exclude that there is a much closer temporal link between the final abandonment of the town site and the erection of this important monastery, with its church less than 1 km away. We might perhaps hypothesise a kind of shifted religious focus, away from the ruinous urban core, that fostered a level of enduring grouped settlement close by. Our still limited data could in fact support a previously controversial view by Ward-Perkins (1984, 51–84) that, throughout the peninsula, these (former) urban locations frequently survived as politico-military, and especially ecclesiastical, foci throughout the troubled fifth to seventh centuries. Their populations were small, and the shape and scale of the settlements after the mid-sixth century can better be described as mere villages, but their role was significant in the later first millennium revival of genuine urban activity in this part of Italy. It must be stressed, however, that this urban revival for *Potentia* did not take place in the same site, but in a better defensible location nearby. And this is by no means an exceptional situation in this part of Adriatic Italy,

since, strikingly, between the sixth and ninth centuries, all of the Potenza valley city sites were eventually abandoned as places for suitable clustered settlement. This was partly conditioned by the fact that the river corridor formed a disputed frontier territory between Lombards and Byzantines, thereby determining a complete reorganisation of the settlement structure between the end of the sixth and the first half of the seventh centuries – changes also demonstrated in the recent rural surveys of the area (Verreyke and Vermeulen 2009; Verdonck and Vermeulen 2004, 220).

Finally, we are also convinced that the specific topographic position of *Potentia* played a role in its decay and eventual total annihilation. A combination of a poor strategic position in the narrow and erosion-sensitive valley floor and an altering situation in the soil hydrology must have been among the most important causes of the diminishing population of some central Adriatic towns in favour of surrounding hilltop sites. Most of the interdisciplinary work by the Ghent team of geomorphologists (directed by M. De Dapper) in the coastal area of the river Potenza concerned the hydrography, the evolution of soil erosion, the alluviation/colluviation history of the area and coastal change. The reconstruction of the physical landscape of these periods is based on remote sensing (satellites, aerial photography), field observations (hand augering, geophysical survey, altimetric survey, etc.), soil sample analysis (OSL dating, mollusc determination) and historic-geographical research (maps, ancient documents). Thanks to this research, fully integrated into the archaeological research agenda, it is now clear that the Roman-period situation of the Potenza river, flowing a few hundred metres south of *Potentia*, and debouching slightly inland of the present coastline, endured until the fourteenth century. The precise location of the Potenza during Roman times is now known, as are the locations of the medieval flood activities that partly destroyed the southern outskirts of the town area together with parts of its immediate hinterland. There are strong indications of the progressive erosion of the hillsides during Roman times and especially lack of attention to the fluvial system from the fifth or sixth century onwards, meaning a failure to remove mud and sands which came to block the mouth of the river and gradually changed the once fertile and well adapted agricultural lower valley into a landscape of marshes and detritic gullies. This hastened and expanded the formation of unhealthy lagoon environments, silently obscuring the ancient port settlements, of which *Potentia* is a good example. In this area, where the town and port structures near the river mouth had been long since in decay, and geopolitical conditions since the Lombard intrusions and territorial pressures had changed the importance of the connection between interior and coast, there was no need or scope to counter the effect of these dynamics. The result was a much more intensive and rapid change in the coastal

landscape, with complete shifts of the river course causing the abandonment of the former bridge and road system. In later medieval times, however, when the new settlement of Porto Recanati started to develop, people began slowly to re-impose their influence over the hydrographic network (Baldetti 1983). Despite this, settlement patterns in this region of central Adriatic Italy did not dramatically change from that which emerged in the early medieval period: even in the much better documented fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the population still continued to concentrate in the already existing habitats on hilltops at some distance from the coastline, while the old coastal settlements were now completely abandoned. The recovery and reclamation of the coastal zones and the re-awakening of port and trade roles only really came about again from the nineteenth century onwards (Staffa 2001), as is indeed evident in the case of the small fishing town of Porto Recanati.

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